



# Virginia's Executive Mansion









Virginia's Executive Mansion has been home, office and center of official entertaining for governors and their families since 1813. It was the second governor's residence constructed in the nation, and is today the oldest governor's residence still used for its original purpose.

The Executive Mansion was Virginia's third state-owned governor's residence. The first two governors under the Constitution of 1776, Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, occupied the colonial Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. In the spring of 1780, Governor Jefferson moved with the government to the new capital in Richmond. For a short period after that relocation, Virginia's governors occupied rental properties.

During the latter part of the 18th century, a second governor's residence was built in Richmond, on almost the same spot the Mansion stands today. The building, a modest frame structure, stood for twelve gubernatorial administrations and was home to three future United States presidents - James Monroe as governor, and John Tyler, Jr. and William Henry Harrison while their fathers were governors.

In 1811, Governor John Tyler, Sr., arguing before the Legislature that the house was "intolerable for a private family" brought about the decision to build the current residence. The General Assembly directed "the building of a house for the use of the governor of the commonwealth, on the lot on which the present governor's house stands." (An Act directing the Sale of certain Public Property, and for other purposes. Passed February 13, 1811).

*Facing page: Virginia's Executive Mansion, seen here in a front view, is an excellent example of Federal style architecture.*

*Above: A close look at the front doorknob reveals its detail - the Virginia State seal.*



## American Design

The Executive Mansion is an excellent example of Federal style architecture, a style heavily influenced by English architecture but uniquely American. It was designed by Alexander Parris, a New England native who was already in Richmond designing homes for two prominent families. Records show that Parris was paid fifty dollars to draft a design for the new governor's house which was modified during construction by the builder, Christopher Tompkins. The Mansion was finished in 1813 at a total cost of \$18,871.82.

When it was built, Virginia's "state house" or "government house" as the Executive Mansion was often called in its early years, was the finest official residence of any governor in the United States.

Originally, the first floor held only four rooms (ladies' parlor, governor's office, dining room, parlor) plus the broad entrance hall. There were two plain porches on the north and south fronts, but there was no front porch, only wooden steps up to the door. The second floor contained four bedrooms and a storeroom. To the south of the Mansion stood several outbuildings, including a two-story brick kitchen, laundry and slave quarters, which still stands today and is used as a guest cottage.

*Above left: View of the Capitol grounds from the second floor foyer window.*

*Below: In 1954, Governor and Mrs. Thomas Stanley chose landscape architect Charles Gillette to redesign the Mansion's south garden space. The garden was restored to Gillette's design specifications in 1999 by the Garden Club of Virginia.*





*Above: The view from the front entrance highlights the elegant succession of arches framing the long vista to the dining room.*





Above: The dining room was not part of the original structure, it was added at the rear of the house in 1906. The painting above the sideboard (artist unknown) is believed to be of Queen Elizabeth I and dates back to the late sixteenth century.

Facing page top left: Front foyer circa 1912; prior to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rooms on the Mansion's first floor were frequently furnished to reflect the style of the times.

Facing page right: The First Lady's Parlor as it exists today.

## Mansion Alterations



Over the years, the public and private rooms of the house were frequently altered, decoratively and structurally, to suit the tastes and needs of the time.

- In the early 1830's, the front porch was added, the side porches replaced and the parapets above the eaves constructed.
- Installation of the first indoor toilet and bathing facilities was undertaken in 1846 under the first term of Governor William (Extra Billy) Smith. It was installed in a front room of the basement.
- It is believed that the circular fishpond in front of the house was built under the term of Governor James Kemper. It has served over the decades as a convenient swimming pool for governors' children and dogs.

- In 1906, at the direction of Governor Claude Swanson, architect Duncan Lee was selected to combine the original parlor and dining room into one large ballroom and add the large oval dining room at the rear of the house.
- Today, since the advent of formal tours, the second floor of the Mansion serves as the private living quarters where families conduct most of their daily lives. Altered many times over the years, the private quarters now consist of five bedrooms, a den, a study, a large foyer and a small kitchen. Families can express their own personal style in the private quarters.





## Old Governor's Office

In addition to serving as the governor's home, the Mansion is also a place of business. In its first century, the atmosphere of the first floor was considerably different than it is today. Until the early twentieth century, Virginia governors conducted their daily business from the north-front room now referred to as "the Old Governor's Office." At that time, it was customary for governors to meet with nearly anyone who called; callers awaited their session with the governor seated in chairs in the entrance hall and likely passed their time lounging, talking and spitting tobacco. In 1902, Governor Andrew Jackson Montague was the first to move this daily public business out of the Mansion and into the third floor office at the State Capitol.

Today the Mansion, although no longer serving as the Governor's official public office, continues to serve governors in their work. The Mansion remains an important gathering place in the civic, political, cultural and business life of the Commonwealth.



Above: In the nineteenth century, Governors received all their business callers in the Governor's Office, located at the front of the mansion. Here, the office as decorated and occupied by Governor Charles O'Ferrall (1894-98), complete with ornate wallpaper, spittoon and stacked picture frames.

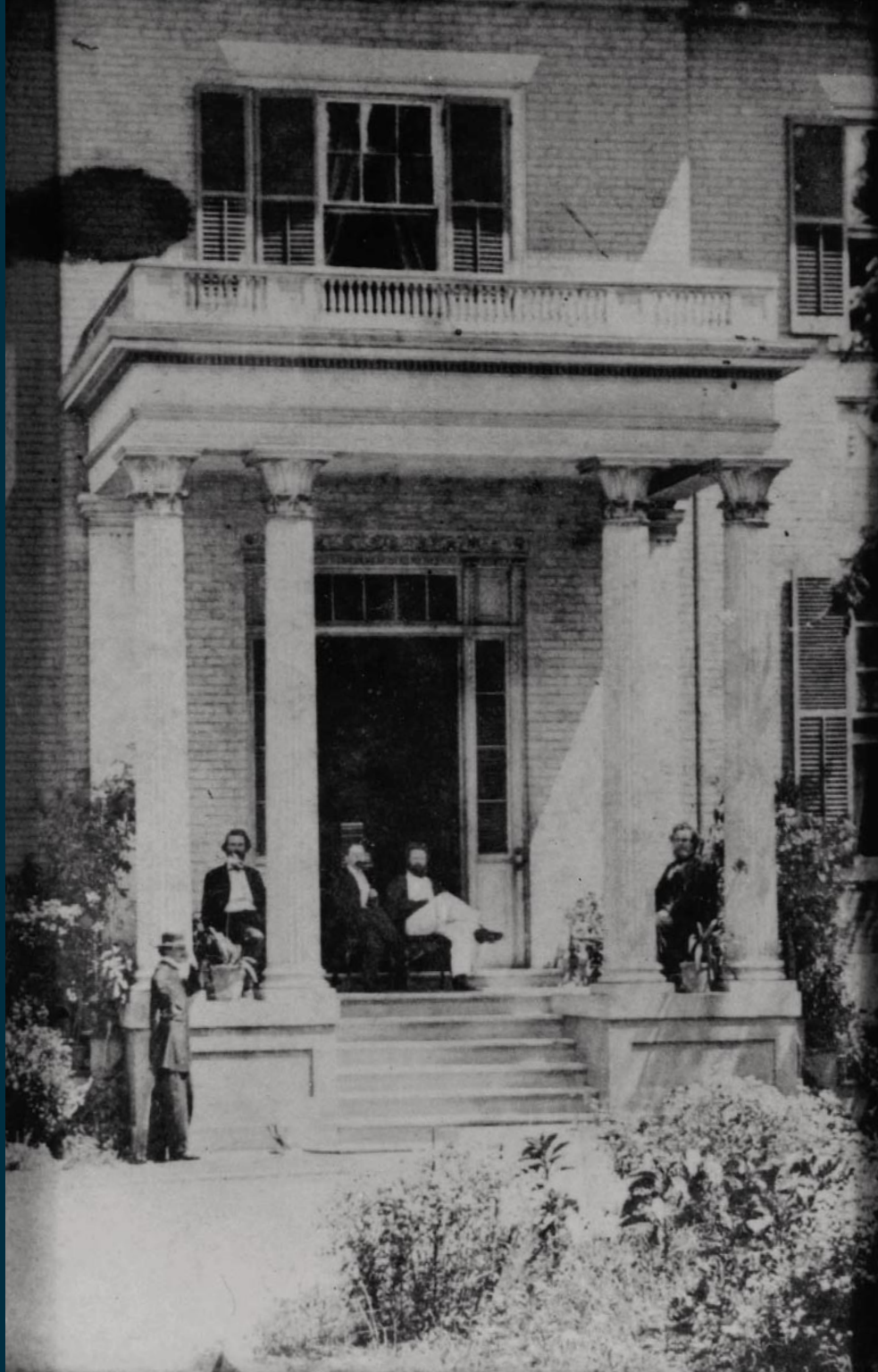
Below: Governor John Pollard, 1932, hosts then-Governor of New York Franklin D. Roosevelt and Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie.







Above: The Old Governor's Office was restored in 1999 to reflect an early nineteenth century appearance. The carpet is a pattern originating in 1800 and was created from archival point papers.



This page: The portico of the Executive Mansion during Governor Francis Pierpont's administration, 1865-1868, immediately following the Civil War.

Facing page: The Mansion has served as host and backdrop for Virginia events and traditions throughout its history. Here, Governor and Mrs. George Campbell Peery accept a gift from Virginia Native Americans during the annual "Tax Tribute" Ceremony, a tradition which continues to this day and is held annually during Thanksgiving week.



## Witness to History

While many visit the Executive Mansion for its architectural and civic significance, it is the human history of this home that is perhaps most intriguing. The house has served as a witness to the momentous and the mundane in an ever-changing Virginia. The stories associated with the Mansion are as interesting and diverse as the history of Virginia itself.

- The war of 1812 was raging when Governor James Barbour and his family arrived and by the first summer of their residency, British troops were ravaging the Virginia coastline and had advanced up to Williamsburg.
- In 1813, Governor Barbour and his wife, Lucy, instituted a tradition of hospitality that continued for decades – wherein food and a punch bowl were kept constantly available in the dining room for legislators, so that during the session any legislator was welcome to enter the house and make himself at home.
- General Lafayette visited in 1824, addressing thousands on the Capitol grounds and later dining at the Mansion with Governor James Pleasants.
- In 1852, a mob gathered on the Capitol grounds angered by Governor Joseph Johnson's commutation of the death sentence of a teenage slave. The mob pushed through the iron gates of the Mansion, demanding the presence of the Governor and hitting the house with stones, breaking windows. The Governor held firm to his decision and the slave was spared.
- During the retreat of the Confederate Army and the subsequent burning of Richmond in 1865, Governor William (Extra-Billy) Smith fled ahead of the Union troops; but his wife Elizabeth Smith and daughter Mary Amelia remained behind in Richmond to pack up personal and state property, while a bucket brigade saved the Capitol and the Mansion from the fire that consumed much of Richmond.
- In 1926, Governor Elbert Trinkle's 5 year old son, Billy, accidentally held a sparkler too close to the family Christmas tree, starting a fire that burned the rear of the house. Mrs. Helen Trinkle, ignoring efforts to prevent her from re-entering the blazing house, ran back inside and up the stairs to rescue her 15-year-old son, Lee.
- The bodies of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson and Olympic Gold Medallist Arthur Ashe have both laid in state on the first floor. The house has witnessed the visits of Generals Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, on separate occasions.
- Marshall Ferdinand Foch attended a luncheon and ceremony in remembrance of the Armistice in 1921;
- Winston Churchill visited the Mansion for a week in the late 1920's to stay with Governor Harry Byrd while conducting research for his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.

Through many years and an eventful history, the Executive Mansion has endured as the center of work and family life for Virginia governors, retaining its grace, beauty and distinctly American character.





*Above: A front view of Virginia's Executive Mansion circa 1880.*

To schedule a tour or for more information, please call (804) 371-8687 or email: [executivemansion@governor.virginia.gov](mailto:executivemansion@governor.virginia.gov)

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